

**Tackling underachievement of learners from ethnic minorities:
A comparison of recent policies of school improvement
in Germany, England and Switzerland**

*Mechtild Gomolla
Institute of Education
University of Muenster, Germany*

Abstract

Over the past few decades, in many western countries with large immigrant populations, inequalities in education relating to ethnic background have increased. Interventions traditionally consist of selective compensatory arrangements that focus on instruction in the second language--especially in early stages of schooling--and the treatment of issues of difference, equality and racism within the curriculum. This article discusses recent educational policies that attempt to systematically integrate aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity and equity targets within broader policies of school effectiveness and school improvement. The paper presents the author's findings in an international comparative study of school-improvement strategies that tackle ethnic inequalities in education in Germany, Switzerland and England. Using theories of institutional discrimination and organizational action, strengths and weaknesses of these strategies in their specific political context, particularly structural limitations for inclusiveness resulting from market- and performance-oriented education reforms, will be highlighted.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, in many western countries with large immigrant populations, inequalities in education relating to ethnic background have increased rather than diminished. Interventions that address these inequalities traditionally consist of selective compensatory arrangements that focus on instruction in the second language--especially in early stages of schooling--and the treatment of issues of difference, equality and racism within the curriculum. International and national surveys of educational achievement, such as the PISA studies, have generated widespread discussion in Europe regarding the gap between the opportunities of children and young adults with immigrant backgrounds and those of their non-immigrant peers, with regards to accessing more highly qualified educational paths (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2001, 2004; Bos, Lankes, Schwippert, Valtin, & Walther, 2003). For this reason, provisions for pupils from immigrant families have been reinforced in several European countries. For example, in Germany strategies include early assessment of language skills, extension of instruction in German as a second language in preschool classes and primary schools, preparatory classes for children with German as a second language, flexible times for transition from preschool classes to primary school and expansion of full-time schools (Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration, 2005).

As in many other parts of Europe, the German system of education has undergone extensive reforms to focus on policies of devolution and choice, and the implementation of new systems of quality management. However within this fundamental restructuring of the organizational structures, funding, and contexts of public schooling, equity-issues are scarcely considered.

These deficiencies in current educational reforms continue the assimilatory tradition of previous decades (see Krüger-Potratz, 2005). Provisions to improve the performance of underachieving ethnic groups are restricted to selective compensatory arrangements that focus on the assessment of language skills and instruction in the second language. Conventional structures and processes of schooling, however, are not taken into consideration. Large-scale surveys of achievement raise serious questions concerning the *institutional* barriers for children from immigrant families and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Qualitative studies, which illuminate the complex and often hidden *mechanisms* of the reproduction of ethnic inequality at the different levels of schooling, indicate that a broader provision for linguistic and socio-cultural diversity is necessary (Gogolin & Neumann 1997; Gomolla & Radtke 2002; Weber 2003). Moreover, in education systems where individual schools enjoy high levels of autonomy, inequalities increase between the performances of different social and ethnic groups. This is especially the case in Anglo-American countries, where market- and performance-oriented reforms are the most pervasive (see Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998; Slee & Weiner, 1998; Radtke & Weiß, 2000; Gomolla, 2005).

This article discusses recent educational policies that attempt to systematically integrate aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity and equity targets within broader policies of school effectiveness and school improvement. Specific interventions observed in an international comparative study of school-improvement strategies that tackle ethnic inequalities in education in Germany, England, and Switzerland are presented. Each of these strategies is analyzed in their specific political context using theories of institutional discrimination and organizational action. In particular, structural limitations for inclusiveness resulting from market- and performance-oriented education reforms are highlighted.

Immigration, education for immigrants and institutional discrimination

The term "institutional discrimination" derives from debates on institutional racism within the civil rights movement in Northern America. The phrase "institutional racism" was introduced by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (1967) to describe how white interests and attitudes saturate the key institutions that shape American life. Especially in England, the term has moved from the field of political activism and academic debate into popular usage since the 1990s (Gillborn, 2002). In Germany, discussions on institutional racism – although the term institutional *discrimination* is more common – have only begun recently. Wider attention to discrimination has resulted in particular from discussions regarding the European Union's new anti-discrimination legislation and the adoption of a national bill on equal treatment in 2006.ⁱ In addition, the recognition of ethnic inequalities in education has ensued debates about institutional discrimination (Gomolla 2005; Gomolla & Radtke, 2002; Hormel & Scherr 2004; Jäger & Kaufmann, 2002; Kristen, 2006; Schofield, 2006).

Unlike "racial" harassment, theoretically understood as a result of individual or group prejudice (Allport, 1954), institutional discrimination scrutinizes the organizational structures and

processes in the basic institutions of social life as sources of discrimination, for example, education, health system, social services, housing, police or the media (Feagin & Feagin, 1986; Troyna & Williams, 1986). In a recent report from England, institutional discrimination is defined as a result of:

the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (Macpherson of Cluny, 1999, 6.3.4)

This quotation highlights the ways in which discrimination pervades the normal course of life and professional culture of institutions and those working in them. Because this kind of discrimination is a part of the daily routine and the institutional *habitus*, it is hardly recognized by individual professionals or even by the persons it disadvantages. Thus, research on institutional discrimination aims at describing and explaining the complex and sometimes contradictory ways as to *how* social differences are constructed and reconstructed in education practices and particularly, how *organizational* structures, rules and practices contribute to these processes. Furthermore, empirical investigations of the processes that occur within schools can draw from newer theories of organizational action. These theories, such as behavioral decision-making theory and Neo-Institutionalism, challenge the image of organizations as technical, rational instruments that steer organizational activities in efficient ways and are conveyed by scientific management (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; March 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978; Olsen, 1991). By focusing on the issues of how decisions are facilitated or restricted by the organization's rationality and the micro-politics of organizations, these theories offer a useful analytical framework to analyze how unequal opportunities for different groups to fulfill their educational potential are affected by the institutional and organizational structures of schools and their environment (Gomolla, 2005, 2005a, 2005b; Gomolla & Radtke, 2002). For example, a German case study of the elementary school selection processes highlighted how a broad spectrum of mechanisms of discrimination affected the school career of children from immigrant families, often in combination with socio-economic and gender characteristics over the entire span of a school career (Gomolla & Radtke, 2002). This is illustrated by the fact that in secondary schools, children from immigrant families are overrepresented in the lowest qualifying track. Ascriptions concerning bilingualism and cultural background play a role in teacher expectations, predictions of children's further development, recommendations made to parents regarding students' further education, and practices of assessment and allocation. The disadvantaging and exclusion of children from immigrant families is the result of a complex interplay between various forms of direct and indirect discrimination embedded in the daily routines of schooling (Feagin & Feagin, 1986). For example, bilingual children deemed deficient in German may be held back at school entry while later in elementary school their older age marks them as potentially having special educational needs. Though these mechanisms were often determined by organizational necessities and restraints seen in single schools (e.g. sending children for one more year to preschool due to a lack of resources for instruction in the second language), they could also be traced back to several sources: (1) the legislative and policy context of the education system and other political fields, especially immigration politics; (2) organizational structures at the community and school level; (3) established practices and routines in single organizations; and (4) a pedagogical common sense that is steeped in deficit-

oriented and ethnocentric assumptions. From the perspective of institutional discrimination, a transformation toward increased inclusiveness demands comprehensive strategies of whole-school-change to tackle ethnic inequalities. Such strategies must affect not only schools, but also their wider institutional settings.

Raising quality and equality in education: Case studies from three countries

An international comparative study carried out by the author investigated initiatives that systematically attempt to integrate equity targets and linguistic and socio-cultural differences into mainstream policies of school improvement (Gomolla, 2005, 2005a). Three different strategies were studied: (1) In the German Federal State North-Rhine Westphalia, *Intercultural Learning* was introduced as a subject in the federal state program for school development entitled, "Developing school culture and institutional opening of schools" (GÖS). (2) In England, initiatives to improve the performance of ethnic minority pupils were embedded within the scope of general school improvement across the country, and finally, (3) In the Swiss Canton of Zurich, the school improvement program, "Quality in multi-ethnic schools" (QUIMS) was developed.

Based on theories of institutional discrimination, the study focused on three overarching questions:

- (1) How are strategies framed to deal with issues of diversity and social justice within the broader scope of new systems of quality management in education?
- (2) What new opportunities do these strategies offer for the development of inclusive schooling in ethnically diverse societies? Do they allow for a better adaptation of the organizations to heterogeneous preconditions and educational needs? Are they used within schools as an organizational framework in which to raise discrimination as a topic and to uncover and change the mechanisms of discrimination?
- (3) What new opportunities for institutionalizing ethnic and social inequalities are provided by the broader policy context of these initiatives, especially regarding current market and performance-oriented reforms?

The comparison consisted of two main steps. First, each of the three strategies was analyzed in isolation in its specific political context. Second, a more general recapitulative comparison was carried out on the basis of the three national studies. In addition to the analysis of the political strategies by document studies and expert-interviews, the author carried out case studies in each country focusing on exemplary primary schools. The schools were selected on the recommendations of educational experts in each country because they were considered to be especially active and successful in implementing these strategies. Data collection took place in spring 1999 and autumn 2000. Data was collected through classroom observations, document analysis, and interviews with teachers at the schools as well as professionals in educational administration and other organizations that supported school improvement activities.

In the following sections, the core features of each program will be presented. The varied scope of examined strategies will be highlighted by some findings from the ethnographic school studies.

Model 1: Intercultural learning as a focus of school development in North-Rhine Westphalia

During the 1990s, reform of the German education system was initiated with the introduction of school autonomy measures and new systems of quality assurance at center stage. However, equity issues have rarely been mentioned explicitly within the scope of these mainstream reforms. School development schemes focusing on the achievements of children from immigrant families exist only as specialized programs. An example is the scheme for "Intercultural Learning" within the Federal State Program *"Developing school culture and institutional opening of schools"* (GÖS) in North-Rhine Westphalia (the largest state in Germany). Schools participate in the program on a voluntary basis. In return, GÖS offers participating schools assistance in further developing their educational expertise and practice. Schools receive limited financial aid, consultations, and networking help; they also benefit by sharing beneficial experiences.

"Intercultural Learning" is one of five areas in which the schools can propose projects. This topic subsumes many differing aims: overcoming xenophobia and racial intolerance, creating international meetings, supporting multilingualism and cultural diversity. The scheme involves using teaching methods that aim at more holistic learning experience, such as real-life situations, learning by doing, and hands-on learning. The spectrum of projects within the area of "Intercultural Learning" includes exchange projects with schools in other parts of the world to family-literacy-classes and co-operation with parents and local communities. However, problems of ethnic inequalities are not explicitly mentioned or dealt with.

The Intercultural Learning scheme can be characterized as an enrichment of curricular and extra-curricular activities through aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity. School change as a result of these activities is restricted to situational and problem-specific adaptations to specific local needs, which concern only selective aspects of school life. Issues of discrimination are only addressed on the surface.

The strengths and weaknesses of this approach were studied in a primary school, that has been participating in the GÖS-program since the end of the 1980s. This inner-city school is located in a former industrial area, where there is a high rate of unemployment and poverty as well as high ethnic diversity. For many years, the head teacher engaged in strengthening relations with other institutions, immigrant organizations and parents in the local community. Most of these activities were developed as a contribution to improve opportunities for children from immigrant families, most of who come from a Turkish background.

Within the scope of the GÖS-program, projects were carried out primarily in social studies, science, religion, sports and remedial classes in the afternoon. The program did not substantially influence German and mathematics lessons. Although a gradual institutional change could be observed in many respects, for example, in the wide range of leisure activities in the afternoon, inter-religious initiatives, annual ceremonies and celebrations, in the cooperation with individuals and organizations in their respective suburbs, or the wide range of strategies to assist cooperation with parents, attention to structural issues remained unaddressed. The school atmosphere was positively affected by a high commitment to include every child, however, students' achievements and assessment practices for the transfer to specialized or secondary schools were rarely mentioned with regard to questions of inclusion and the development of non-discriminatory practices.

Model 2: Initiatives to tackle ethnic inequalities in education in England

In England, starting with the Education Reform Act of 1988, the education system was restructured radically. In addition to increased local management of schools, a market model was imposed in which schools were presented as providers that must compete against other schools for students. The technology employed to raise standards covered a wide range of interventions, including: a new national curriculum with standardized tests; tracking individual students based on national, local, and individual targets; public league tables; school inspections; redefining head teachers as corporate managers; new teacher assessments up to performance-related payment, amongst other initiatives based on the achievements of pupils. For almost an entire decade, issues of diversity and equity were banished from the agenda. Consequently, social segregation in schools, achievement gaps between different socio-ethnic groups, and especially the quota of black male juveniles expelled from school, grew rapidly (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000). The 1997 elected (New) Labour government continued their predecessors' quest for raising standards. However, within the existing structures, new initiatives were also introduced to tackle educational inequalities and social exclusion. Measures encompassed explicit targets to improve achievement in English and mathematics in primary schools; reduce class sizes for 5- to 7-year-olds; create early excellence centers; introduce literacy summer schools, out-of-school learning activities, and family literacy schemes; and "Educational Actions Zones" in areas of educational underperformance. In addition, a daily lesson in literacy and numeracy was introduced, which was also intended for imparting English as a second language (DfEE, 1997; Barber, 1999).

In 1999, the concluding report of the inquiry into the murder of the black college-student Stephen Lawrence in 1993, and the failed subsequent investigation of the police, who refused to acknowledge a racist background of the crime, provoked intensive public debates across the nation on institutional racism as a pervasive problem in British society (Macpherson of Cluny, 1999). The Race Relations (Amendment) Act of 2000 emphasized the duties of public bodies and institutions to positively pursue and achieve Race Equality outcomes. As a result, problems of ethnic inequalities in education have been faced more explicitly than in previous decades. *Ethnic monitoring*, which is the process of collecting, storing and analyzing data regarding people's ethnic backgrounds, was established at both the national and local levels as a primary instrument in identifying problems of educational inequalities and for placing specific interventions and controlling their success.

Another important instrument was the newly introduced *Ethnic Minorities Achievement Grant* (EMAG). EMAG distinguishes itself from previous provisions for second language instruction for immigrant children from former Commonwealth countries in several ways: The use of EMAG was extended from providing second language instruction in early stages of schooling to the improving of the results for underachieving ethnic groups at all levels of schooling. Now allocation of extra resources is based on concrete targets to raise the achievements of particular underachieving groups from Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Additionally, the bulk of the resources (85%) is allocated directly to schools, to enable them to respond more efficiently to local needs. For example, teachers paid by EMAG not only work in the classroom, but also play an active role in school improvement activities. The EMAG is flanked by comprehensive systems of support and control, such as providing schools with statistical data, best-practice models, working schemes, materials, and raising issues of diversity and equity within audits with experts from LEAs. A revision of the National Curriculum with regard to issues of ethnic

diversity included the introduction of the new subject "Citizenship Education".

The attempt of the British government to tackle the underachievement of learners from ethnic minorities can essentially be described as output-driven strategies aiming at improving the performance of disadvantaged groups. An open exploration of structures, activities, ways of thinking, and effects of individual and organizational practices is not the primary concern of these initiatives. Strengths and shortcomings of this approach were studied in a primary school in South London, which has a high proportion of refugees, asylum seekers, children receiving free school meals, and children with special educational needs. The teachers succeeded in combining obligatory instruments of school improvement with a concern for individual needs and a clear commitment to ensure a safe environment for all children and positive social relations within the school community. For example a general flexibility concerning disruptions in the classroom was observed. Because many children from refugee and asylum-seeking families had been traumatized by their war-time experiences or their escape, newcomers were often temporarily grouped together regardless of age, and their parents and siblings were welcomed during lessons. Weekly family-literacy-lessons, which fulfilled a variety of functions, were integral to successful integration. Teachers of English as a Second Language were versed in the careful assessment and tracking of individual students, and in delivering effective language instruction within the classes and in special groups. According to official school data these activities contributed to good academic results, compared with other schools with similar social preconditions.

The successful work of highly dedicated teachers cannot alter the fact that the students in this school are doubly disadvantaged – first as refugees, immigrants or asylum seekers, and second because they attend school in one of poorest districts of the country, where more pupils with special learning and emotional needs share fewer resources than neighboring schools in better-off districts. Although the school received limited government support for bilingual children and children with special educational needs, the resources were rigorously allocated to the "most urgent cases". The emotionally supportive school climate is of little help against the systematic disadvantages experienced by large groups of learners with English as a second language when taking the national tests. In spite of the commitment to not discriminating against or excluding any child, some strategies to meet targets for standardized testing were tolerated, despite running the risk of marginalizing the most vulnerable children. Ability grouping in higher classes as well as targeting special children were regarded as necessary, not only for the benefit of the students themselves but also to raise the overall achievements of the school. Not least because of the high engagement in the school, it was particularly disheartening for teachers, parents and students to be placed at the bottom of school rankings.ⁱⁱ

Though questions of ethnic equality are considered to be an important theme on the standards agenda, the potential of the initiatives that address this need is undermined by determining factors at the macro-level. These include the social segregation and hierarchy of schools, the measurement of educational success via the outcomes of externally-examined tests in core subjects, the authoritarian top-down systems of school improvement and the tough competition for high positions on the performance tables. The bottom line is that under these strategies, segregation and selection increase--particularly for the most disadvantaged groups (Bhattacharyya, Ison, & Blair, 2003; Tikly, Osler, & Hill, 2005).

Model 3: "Quality in multi-ethnic schools" (QUIMS) in the Swiss Canton of Zürich

The school improvement project "Quality in multi-ethnic schools" (QUIMS) in the Swiss Canton of Zürich began in 1996 as an integral part of a general reform of the education system of the state. Similar to the educational reforms in England and in Germany, the extension of the local autonomy of schools and the development and implementation of new systems of quality management took center stage. As opposed to England, however, mechanisms of market competition were not in the fore; rather, the conservation of a state-based public school was emphasized (ED Zürich, 1997). Against the background of growing numbers of middle-class-families leaving inner city districts with ethnically diverse populations, the government responded with the gradual development of an area-wide model of quality assurance in multi-ethnic schools--a powerful political message against social segregation and for a common public primary school (see also Ochsner, Kenny, Sieber, 2000).

QUIMS offers extra financial and professional help to schools with 40% or more pupils from immigrant backgrounds. The money must be used to develop special strategies according to local needs. This project aims at raising the standard of education in these schools so that they will also attract Swiss or middle class parents and pupils. Secondly, the project strives to close the gap between the achievements of different social groups. A third goal is to improve students', parents' and teachers' satisfaction with the school environment. The following fields of school development are seen as the most important in improving learning and social development for *all* children: (1) effective teaching and learning, (2) instruction for bilingual children in German as well as in their first languages, (3) a general adaptation of practices of diagnosis and assessment to the needs of linguistical and socio-cultural heterogeneity, (4) participation and co-operation with parents, (5) cooperation with other educational institutions and (6) an inclusive and non-discriminatory school ethos. Participating schools can choose one or two out of these modules for a school improvement project. They receive well-structured schemas for school development and additional support from the educational administration, including advisory services, professional development, materials, handbooks, local networks and evaluation.

In terms of the dynamics of school change, the quality-assurance-program QUIMS was the most promising, allowing for both situational and problem-specific adaptation to linguistic and cultural heterogeneity as well as forms of organizational change, characterized as organizational learning. The primary school visited for the case study is located in an industrial city in the Canton of Zürich, which also had a high proportion of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds, mostly from the former states of Yugoslavia, Turkey and Italy. In this school, the decision to take part in QUIMS and the implementation of the program was accompanied by an intensive phase of team building and the setting-up of new work structures in the school for external team supervision and other improvements. In this process, the teachers gained the confidence that was needed in order to explore their own practice and to develop a common mission statement with regards to issues of diversity and equity. It allowed them to explore their teaching experiences in linguistically and socio-culturally diverse classrooms and to experiment with alternative styles of teaching and forms of cooperation (e.g. team-teaching, sitting in on classes, developing a feed-back orientated learning culture amongst staff, etc.) Generally the program, which began by dealing with teachers' concrete requirements and problems in the classroom, simultaneously sensitized the teachers to ethnic and social inequality and stereotyping. Though the participants found it easier and more obvious to

discuss the challenges of linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom, power structures in the overall organization of schooling were also discussed as causes of discrimination, for example the structural barriers that could prevent a child from an immigrant background with a good school performance from attending a secondary school for higher achievers.

Compared with the initiatives to tackle ethnic inequalities in England, the Swiss strategy offers some important advantages for the development of inclusive schools, which also deal with factors at the level of the education system. An auspicious factor is the clear focus on the processes of teaching and learning, instead of performance data. Linguistic and cultural diversity is not incorporated additively into the core activities of the school, but as an inducement for institutional transformation in the main fields of practice. QUIMS attaches value to attractive incentives and financial and professional support for participating teachers and schools, as well as co-operation between schools and the local administration in partnership. Non-existent league-tables and the deliberate abdication of the right of parents to choose the primary schools their children attend concede necessary freedom to individual schools. Based on careful, open explorations of their own practices, analysis of needs and professional on-site consulting, they can develop their own strategies, to ablate the institutional structures and practices that have proven to be obstacles to learning and the development of particular children or social groups.

Conclusion

The strategies examined in this paper demonstrate that the quest for quality and effectiveness in the education system can be compatible with a commitment to equality. They exemplify a broad spectrum of strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning in linguistically and culturally diverse schools. The varied scope of examined strategies results from different conceptualizations as well as determining factors at the macro level of the education system.

The investigated program in North-Rhine Westphalia may be particularly effective in some schools in terms of supporting students' emotional and social development, participative competences or their general attitudes. However, this kind of selective compensatory arrangement and the enrichment of curricula through projects on intercultural learning obviously fall short in tackling educational inequalities.

Different to the German GÖS-program, ethnic diversity-based school development in England and in Switzerland is conceptualized as an integral element of mainstream systems of school improvement. Drawing on current school efficacy and school improvement research, these strategies emphasize the centrality of teaching and learning, and of classroom processes in determining schools' academic effectiveness. Additionally they stress processes of whole-school-change (Coelho 1998; Blair & Bourne, 1998; Mächler, 2000; Richardson & Wood, 2000; Rüesch, 1999; Sammons, 2002). Besides the general advantages of such an approach, as described above, the comparison of the British and the Swiss program indicates that school improvement towards more inclusiveness requires beyond adequate pedagogical concepts and instruments for organizational change (e.g. professional support, evaluation systems), arrangements in the broader system of education, which are conducive for the realization of inclusive and non-discriminatory practices in schools. In England, attempts to improve the quality of the organizational practices also in terms of inclusiveness and equality is undermined by highly selective school structures in combination with a market environment for schools,

league tables and restrictive forms of school improvement. These preconditions of school improvement at the macro-level open the field and construct opportunities for discrimination to take root in educational institutions in multiple new ways. These effects should be considered more systematically in future research on school effectiveness, school improvement and inclusion (see Slee & Weiner, 1998). Enhancing the effectiveness of schools towards inclusiveness cannot compensate the quest for more basic reforms of the education system, in particular the cut-back of selective structures of schooling. But the recognition of ethnic diversity and equity as an integral part of mainstream reforms opens at least opportunities for these issues to become an evaluative criterion in the quality of other elements of reforms (such as aspects of the market-model).

Notes

1 Newer documents from the European Union and the European Commission forbid forms of direct and indirect discrimination (EU, 2000, 2000a; ECRI, 2002). Though the term "discrimination" was avoided, this complex definition of discrimination was also incorporated into the German "Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz", which was adopted in August 2006 (Bundesministerium der Justiz, 2006).

2 See Rea & Weiner (1998) for a critical discussion of new statistical methods, such as "value-added", which are intended to be a valid and equity-based critique of the use of both raw league tables and misleading information about inner-city schools.

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